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Virginia man says tapes enhance brain performance

NELLYSFORD, Va. (AP) — "Let this relaxation sink inward, let it sink inward, let it flow into your brain," intones the soothing, mellifluous voice as a low-frequency tone resonates in the background.

"Feel it sinking inward easily and calmly until your entire brain feels more and more relaxed, more and more relaxed."

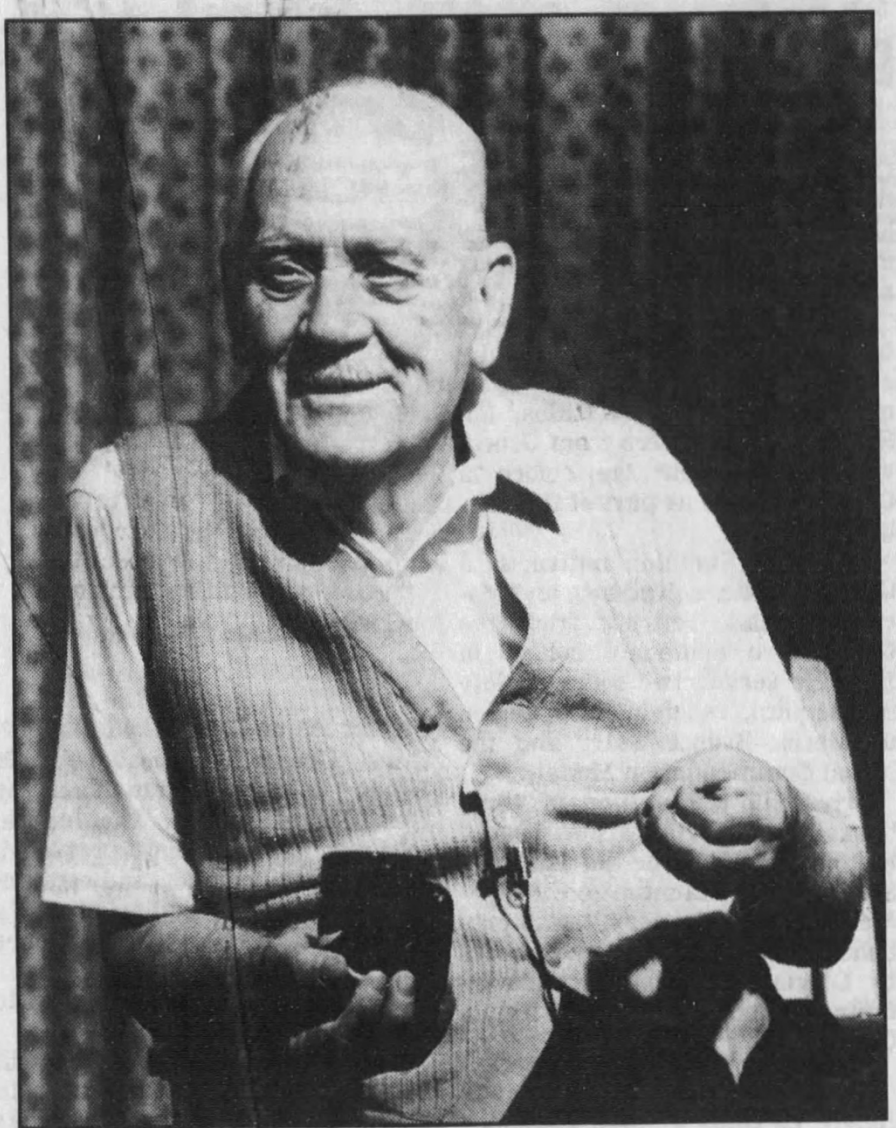
Robert A. Monroe, founder and executive director of The Monroe Institute, is guiding his listener on a 30-minute journey to dreamland via an audio cassette tape called the "Catnapper."

The tape, one of a series of Monroe's "Hemi-Sync" recordings, "recharges and aids recovery from lost sleep or jet lag; relieves anxiety before exams, meetings and speaking ...," according to an institute brochure.

The institute, tucked away in the Ragged Mountains halfway between Charlottesville and Lynchburg, also sells tapes that it says can improve concentration and memory recall, reduce stress, help break the smoking habit, improve one's tennis or golf game and aid in recovery from major illness or surgery.

Each tape has a different audio tone, along with a Monroe voice-over, that the institute says manipulates brain waves to produce a desired behavior.

The tapes "create an auditory environment in which people can relax very profoundly and have extremely focused attention," said Leslie J. France, director of the institute's professional division. "All other things burgeon out of it."



MIND EXPLORER — Robert A. Monroe, founder of the Monroe Institute, is the developer of an audio technology that the institute says can manipulate brain waves to produce a desired behavior.

(AP LaserPhoto)

Ms. France said there are a number of companies that market audio-guidance systems, but they "don't use the specific, carefully modulated frequences that we do.

"There are a lot of people who make colas, for example, but the specific recipe for Pepsi is in a safe somewhere," she said.

Professionals ranging from a best-selling mystery writer to an orthopedic surgeon swear by the tapes, but a leading biofeedback and brain-wave authority says a person can achieve the same results without using Hemi-Sync.

"The danger is that it short-changes people," said Dr. Elmer E. Green, founder and now director emeritus of the voluntary controls program at the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kan. "I have been telling everybody to burn the tapes and start depending on yourselves."

The Menninger Foundation, a psychiatric center that conducts research into many areas of human behavior, trains people "to help themselves instead of programming them," Green said. "We want people to know power is centered in themselves, not in a procedure."

Monroe, 73, said his interest in the use of sound to influence behavior evolved from a long career in broadcasting that included a top executive post with the Mutual Broadcasting System and ownership of radio stations and a cable-television operation.

Through the 1960s and 1970s, Monroe delved into the effect of sounds on the brain and found that certain audio patterns can lead the brain into various states, a discovery for which he received a patent in 1975.

That finding led to a system of "binaural beats" in which separate signals are fed into each ear through stereo earphones to produce a synchronization of the left and right hemispheres of the brain, a focused and coherent state that Monroe called "Hemi-Sync."

Although brain synchronization happens naturally in day-to-day life, it occurs only for random, brief periods of times, Monroe said.

Dr. Lester Fehmi, director of a behavioral medicine clinic in Princeton, N.J., said Monroe's findings are scientifically valid.

"...Rhythmic tones similar to what he has on the tapes have been shown to produce a synchronizing effect on brain waves. You can produce a specific effect," Fehmi said.

Still, a Hemi-Sync user has to be receptive to get the maximum benefit from the tape, said F. Holmes Atwater, director of the institute's brain-mapping project.

"A Monroe tape will not work unless you want to cooperate with it," Atwater said. "There's a lot of psychology involved, but also physiological changes."

Monroe said he began his experiments with sound to help control what he said were out-of-body experiences detailed in his 1971 book "Journeys Out of the Body."

Asked about those who might be skeptical of his experiences, Monroe said, "I am not still in the business of proving that out-of-body experiences exist to the world at large."

Monroe also rejects the "mind-expansion guru" label pinned on him by author Michael Hutchison in his 1986 book "Mega Brain."

"I discount very highly the appellation of guru," said Monroe, "They're supposed to wear turbans and do mystical things. I surely shudder at that. I try to demystify things."

Among the users of the Hemi-Sync tapes is best-selling mystery novelist Phyllis A. Whitney, who said she uses the concentration tape to jump start her imagination.

"When I have a question that stumps me, I sit in a chair and turn on the tape," she said. "In a startlingly few seconds the scene comes. I use it again and again. It works. I get better ideas more quickly."

Dr. James M. Thomas Jr., a clinical psychologist in Ponca City, Okla., said he uses Hemi-Sync tapes as part of his work with delinquent adolescents.

"It has reduced violent behavior by one-half," said Thomas.

He said he also has used the tapes in pain control, in reducing anxiety in patients and in enhancing creativity.

"I was very skeptical about this entire thing," said Thomas, who has been using the tapes for two years. "I have found it to be a very helpful clinical tool. I use it on one-half of my patients. I am convinced there is really something to it and not just a placebo effect."

"It's real, it's not mystical, but I sure don't know what's happening," he added.

Dr. Robert Roalfe, an anesthesiologist at Merritt Hospital in Oakland, Calif., has been using Monroe's "emergency series" tapes for three years to help reduce preoperative anxiety and postoperative pain.

"I have seen a number of cases where patients are extremely anxious before surgery and within five minutes (after using tapes) they are asleep or resting very comfortably," Roalfe said.

"It probably reduces the amount of anesthesia and definitely reduces the amount of postoperative medication required," said Roalfe, who emphasized that he does not use the tapes in lieu of anesthesia.